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SUBJECT: NATIONAL DIALOGUE: STRENGTHENING NATIONAL UNITY
AND BRIDGING DIFFERENCES

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SUMMARY

¶11. (SBU) Secretary General Faisal al-Moammar of the National Dialogue Center told Charge July 27 that King Abdullah had created the national dialogue campaign - aimed at promoting tolerance and moderation in Saudi society - because of Saudi society's reluctance to embrace change and serious differences between Saudi religious leaders on major religious and world issues. Al-Moammar described mosques, schools, and the family as the most important influences shaping Saudi attitudes and said the Center therefore targeted these institutions using various events, training courses, and seminars. Education reform was essential, he said, and was not just a matter of textbooks and curriculum, but of "modernizing" how teachers think. Al-Moammar said before and after polling of participants in various programs indicated the campaign was producing measurable results in promoting greater tolerance and positive change in Saudi society, and in the process strengthening national unity and understanding of mainstream Islamic values.

THE CENTER: BRINGING TOGETHER DIFFERENT VOICES

¶12. (SBU) The Charge met July 27 with Faisal al-Moammar, Secretary General of the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue (KACND) to discuss Saudi Arabia's societal need for a dialogue center in promoting a culture of dialogue and tolerance (reftel). Al-Moammar, who concurrently serves as the Deputy Minister of Education and as an advisor to King Abdullah, discussed how prior to September 11, King Abdullah found that Saudi religious leaders seriously disagreed on major religious and world issues. This led the King in early 2003 to convene 35 religious scholars, all men, from the Ulema to discuss their differing opinions and ideas. The King Abdulaziz Public Library was chosen as the venue for the meeting, al-Moammar wryly noted, so the scholars could turn to the 1.5 million books in the library for answers, should they not be able to agree among themselves.

¶13. (SBU) According to al-Moammar, the meeting was "not relaxed" due to extremists, moderates and liberals as well as different religious sects sitting down at the same table for the first time. However, the atmosphere improved from no handshakes on the first day to offering personal invitations to their private homes on the third and final day of discussions. The single recommendation to come out of the 3-day meeting was the creation of a permanent dialogue center, and shortly thereafter, the King tasked al-Moammar

with the creation of the National Dialogue Center.

SAUDI SOCIETY RESISTANT TO CHANGE

¶ 14. (SBU) A "new" and relatively isolated country for much of its history, al-Moammar explained, "Saudi Arabia is the only country where change is introduced by the government and resisted by society." As the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, every Muslim looks to Mecca and, therefore, to Saudi Arabia. Saudis see themselves as responsible for upholding Islam and associate change with outside influences that negatively affect this role. Saudi society thus has a difficult time adjusting to change and tends to resist or question new ideas and reforms, particularly those coming from outside the kingdom. Although Saudi Arabia is experiencing a "Golden" period characterized by rapid development and reform, "change does not mean affecting core beliefs and values," al-Moammar emphasized.

THREE PLACES OF INFLUENCE: THE MOSQUE, SCHOOL AND FAMILY

¶ 15. (SBU) Al-Moammar opined that the programs and training offered by the Center are specifically designed to encourage and facilitate dialogue in the mosque, school and family - the three places of great influence on one's beliefs and values in Saudi society. He highlighted that instead of solely being used as a place of worship, mosques should function more like a community center as they did in the past, used for discussions and exchange of ideas. As important community leaders with far-reaching influence, many clerics have participated in and benefited from the KACND

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dialogue training programs and seminars. As a result, these clerics set a crucial example for tolerant discourse in Saudi society.

¶ 16. (SBU) Briefly putting on his Deputy Minister of Education hat, al-Moammar discussed at length educational reform and the important role of teachers in creating a more tolerant learning environment. Although the amount of time spent on religion in relation to the sciences has not changed, he said, the way religion is taught and interpreted has improved. Dialogue that encourages students to accept others while still holding true to Islam is the new way of thinking. He emphasized, however, that improving and modernizing education does not mean changing peoples' beliefs. Another KACND official noted that "science and seeking knowledge is a must in Islam." Religious leaders, she continued, must understand that students should be taught to "see God through physics, the sciences and math classes as well as through creativity and invention." It should not just be in religion class where students learn the Quran and Sunna in an isolated learning environment.

¶ 17. (SBU) Additionally, al-Moammar indicated that the quality and teaching methods of teachers and the Saudi curriculum have also improved. Alluding to continuing problems with many teachers, he emphasized that the "thinking of teachers must be modernized." To this end, the KACND signed Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with the Ministry of Education (MOE) and multiple universities to involve teachers and professors in the dialogue training programs. Recently, the King approved \$9 billion to modernize the Saudi education system including new and renovated schools, revised curriculums, long-distance learning programs, and mobile schools in rural areas. Al-Moammar claimed that 2 new school buildings per day and 80 per month are being constructed.

IS THE KACND AFFECTING POSITIVE CHANGE?

¶ 8. (SBU) Al-Moammar opined that relating the importance and need for dialogue and increased toleration directly to Islamic principles is the best way to affect positive change in peoples' behaviors and attitudes. For example, a pure Quranic text of a conversation between God and Satan is often cited to show that dialogue is a part of Islam and should be embraced. When asked by the Charge how effective the KACND is in promoting tolerance and understanding, al-Moammar explained how the KACND conducts monitoring and evaluation of its programs through participant questionnaires that measure attitudes and behavior both before and after the training program or seminar. In this regard, a recent 5 year report compiled by the KACND indicates that the various training programs are successfully affecting positive change in participants.

¶ 9. (SBU) Additionally, al-Moammar mentioned that the KACND signed an agreement with a major company to develop and conduct public opinion polls to more clearly identify what Saudis are thinking and what issues are important in their lives. "This is a breakthrough" he stated, because for the first time, a Saudi organization with the public's trust and the King's approval will conduct opinion polls as opposed to outsiders unfamiliar with the country and Saudi society.

THE KACND: BACKGROUND

¶ 10. (SBU) Beginning in 2003, the KACND has held an annual National Meeting for Intellectual Dialogue focusing on a different subject of national interest each year. Topics have included national unity, moderation, women's rights and obligations, youth, cross-cultural understanding, education and employment. The 8th dialogue meeting, currently underway, focuses on healthcare. Participants represent different ideologies, regions and segments of society, and include representatives from different religious sects, the Ulema, university faculty and teachers, sociologists, economists, youth, businessmen and Islamic scholars and imams. The national meetings not only discuss differences in ideas, but also question services provided by the Saudi government. Interestingly, while the first national meeting had 30 participants, all of whom were men, there was now equal participation of men and women and the last national meeting had 1,000 participants. The King hears recommendations from the meetings and a special committee studies and reviews the recommendations. In this way, public

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opinion is brought directly to the decision makers through the national meetings.

¶ 11. (SBU) The KACND has also developed and conducted a number of training programs, workshops and seminars aimed at the public although a number of MOUs have been signed with government ministries including the MOE and the Center for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV). There is a Certified Trainers Program (reftel) which has certified 1,200 Saudis in 42 cities as well as a Family Dialogue Program, the Ambassador's (Safeer) Program which focuses on cross-cultural understanding between Saudi and foreign students, and community training programs which help Saudis adjust to different cultures. Al-Moammar mentioned that the KACND is looking to expand the Ambassador's program to include participation from American students.

COMMENT

¶ 12. (SBU) More than having the King's stamp of approval, the KACND was the King's own vision in order to foster an environment of tolerance and dialogue on Saudi public consciousness while defeating extremism thinking at home and

anti-Islamic thinking abroad. By embracing the principles of Islam while promoting national dialogue, the KACND has successfully navigated around the hurdle of the conservative religious establishment, which is often the biggest obstacle when dealing with change and reform in Saudi Arabia.

ERDMAN